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Beyond the chains that bind: The political crisis of unions in Western Europe

Graham Taylor, Andy Mathers and Martin Upchurch

The dynamics of neo-liberal restructuring have generated serious tensions in the institutional alignments between social democratic political parties and labor unions in Western Europe. This article explores the origins, development and consequences of the resulting political crisis through a detailed analysis of the institutional alignment of parties and unions in Sweden, Germany, UK and France. The authors reject the argument that the changing contours of the party-union nexus can be understood solely on the basis of a rational choice analysis of labor movement actors in favor of an account that also highlights the importance of historical path dependency and ideological orientation. The resulting complexity of union response to the crisis of the party-union nexus is explored through the construction of a typology that charts union reorientation along the dimensions of accommodation with or resistance against neo-liberalism and within and beyond the national political context.

Keywords: social democracy; trade union politics; party-union nexus; union reorientation.

A key feature of West European social democracy has been the existence of an organic institutional linkage between social democratic political parties and trade unions. A dominant party-union nexus (DPUN) emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries which institutionalized a network of reciprocal relations between the ‘economic’ and ‘political’ wings of the labor movement in Europe (Pizzorno, 1978). There were also important examples of party-union alignments in parts of Latin America (Collier and Collier, 1991). The alliance between these ‘parties of labor’ and unions was based on the ability and willingness of social democratic political parties to pursue labor-friendly legislative reforms when in government in return for moderation and restraint by trade union leaders in the arena of industrial relations and wage demands. These arrangements usually followed the triumph of social democracy over revolutionary socialism or Communism and the adoption of a reformist orientation based on the use of state power to pursue the interests of labor within the boundaries of the capitalist economy and the liberal democratic polity (Esping-Andersen,

1985; Przeworski, 1985; Przeworski & Sprague, 1986). Trade unions were accepted by ruling elites as legitimate societal actors provided they did not challenge property rights and management control of the enterprise. These arrangements were consolidated through modes of regulation which institutionalized social conflict through bi- and trilateral neo-corporatist arrangements between unions, employers and the state (Moschonas, 2002: 63). The stability and persistence of these arrangements in the post-war period was based on the ability of social democratic governments to pursue Keynesian policies within the international stability provided by the Bretton Woods monetary system and the associated mechanisms of corporatist interest mediation were a key component of the Keynesian Welfare State (KWS). The collapse of these certainties and the adaption of social democracy to the dynamics of neo-liberal restructuring have led social democratic governments to pursue policies that have negative consequences for organized labor (See McIlroy, 2009 for an elaboration of this argument in the UK context and more generally Ross and Martin, 1999). This has produced new tensions between social democratic parties and their trade union partners. In this context, trade unions have sought autonomy from social democratic parties in order to struggle against the neo-liberal policies of social democratic governments. Such state-union tensions have been especially intense in the public sector, where neo-liberal policies have ‘rolled back’ the state in order to reduce welfare spending and to dilute pension provision.

The development of neo-corporatism was marked by an incomplete and contingent attempt by the social democratic state to incorporate and promote labor as a responsible ‘partner’ in civil society. This served to soften the radicalism of labor movement politics by marginalizing its militant wing. Indeed, social democracy involved the ‘statization of society’ (Panitch, 1986: 189) or ‘statization of social life’ (Poulantzas, 1978) as the institutional boundaries between state and society became increasingly blurred and indistinct. The bureaucratic forms of representation which resulted from the ‘institutionalization’ of trade unions within ‘pluralist’ industrial relations systems created serious tensions and tended to erode the legitimacy of union leaders amongst rank-and-file union members and temper the societal mobilizing capacity of trade unions (Offe and Wiesenthal, 1985; Müller-Jentsch, 1986; Darlington, 1994) and undermined the ability of unions to develop innovative organizing techniques associated with ‘new’ social movements. Neoliberal restructuring, however, encourages the ‘opening-up’ of civil society through the dilution of these neo-corporatist institutions and encourages the development of new and innovative forms of

union organization and mobilization. This raises the issue as to whether these developments result in either the radicalization or moderation of labor movement politics as the institutional and ideological chains that link trade unions to reformist social democratic parties begin to fragment under the pressure of neo-liberal globalization? There is evidence that in the context of neo-liberal restructuring, progressive parties of the left and trade unions have been reappraising the nature of the existing reciprocal relationships. New alliances are being created including those between trade unions and non-aligned parties of the left and ‘civil society’ movements and campaigns (Robinson, 2000, 2003). The result has been a crisis of the dominant party-union nexus in Latin American and Western European societies.

Katrina Burgess (1999, 2004) has attempted to explore these questions through a rational action approach based on the cost-benefit decisions of party political and trade union actors. However, we would suggest that this approach lacks historical contextual nuance and also downplays the tensions within social democracy and ‘social democratic trade unionism’. In this article, we present an analysis of the fragmentation of party-union alliances and the subsequent partial re-orientation of trade unions in Western Europe. We develop an alternative approach to Burgess by focusing on the importance of historical path dependency and ideology in the framing of trade union orientations to their relationship with political parties. We then explore the crisis of the party-union alliances in Western Europe which, we argue, is based on the crisis of ‘political economism’ (Hyman, 2001) or ‘social democratic’ trade unionism (Padgett & Patterson, 1991:177). We focus on the particular cases of Sweden, Germany, UK and France in order to highlight both the specific ways that neoliberal reforms have been introduced in these societies and the ways in which the responses of party-aligned unions have been shaped and constrained by institutional path dependencies and ideologically framed trade union identities. In the following section, we present a typology of trade union strategic re-orientation in Western Europe. We focus on two interrelated processes of re-orientation. First, the extent to which strains within the dominant party-union nexus are producing divisions within and fractures between unions on the basis of an accommodation to, or resistance against, neo-liberalism. Second, the degree to which a weakening of the party-union nexus is resulting in the emergence of new union identities that express either revised forms of social democracy or its rejection in favor of a more radical politics. We conclude with a critical assessment of the potential for ‘radical political unionism’ in Western Europe in the context of the decline and decomposition of party-union relationships.

Party-union alliances and the ‘loyalty dilemma’: The limits of rationality.

Burgess (1999: 105-11) has conceptualized party-union alliances as ‘regimes’ underpinned by rules, norms and decision-making procedures. The expectations of actors converge and form and reinforce bonds of loyalty and trust on the basis of rational expectations of future behavior between political parties and their trade union allies. In the context of stable post-war settlements, reserves of loyalty were built up between parties and unions. Unions mediated between workers and Government as ‘managers of a virtuous circle of loyalty’ (Burgess, *ibid*: 110). The dynamics of neo-liberal restructuring and more fluid and diverse forms of worker identity, however, arguably make it increasingly difficult to maintain loyalty on the basis of class ideology. According to Burgess, loyalty reserves have become depleted as labor-aligned parties have diversified their support base beyond organized labor, shifted policy-making authority from labor leaders to neo-liberal technocrats and bypassed mediatory institutions in order to cultivate linkages with individualized voters. Burgess (*ibid*: 110-5) has developed the model of organizational behavior based on the work of Hirschman (1970) to suggest that the rational responses of labor leaders to this depletion of ‘loyalty’ have been ‘voice’ and ‘exit’. In contrast to individuals facing a commercial or bureaucratic organization, however, the costs of exit for labor leaders are likely to exceed the costs of voice and, therefore, voice is the default position for labor leaders facing a loyalty dilemma. Based on the ideal typical cases of Mexico, Venezuela and Spain, Burgess (2004: 8-11) constructs a four-position continuum of potential responses by labor leaders spanning loyalty and exit through ‘norm-based’ and ‘norm-breaking’ voice. The position of labor movements along this continuum is determined by the ways in which trade union and party leaders respond to the ‘loyalty dilemma’ and the marginal costs and benefits associated with being disloyal to either rank-and-file workers or a labor-aligned government.

Burgess (2004: 6) argues that the responses of disaffected labor leaders can be explained by two variables: the relative power of the party and workers to punish labor leaders for disloyal behavior and the capacity of a party to act autonomously from its own government. These factors provide divergent levels of power and autonomy that determine the different responses of labor leaders. In response to neo-liberal restructuring and the resulting ‘loyalty dilemma’, it is argued, both parties and unions have utilized the political opportunity structure in order to loosen the alliance and recuperate their autonomy. In this

situation, trade unions are able to switch allegiances owing to the proliferation of potential allies in the party system and civil society. The corollary of this analysis is that unions are likely to refocus on workplace issues and the building of broad alliances in civil society in opposition to unfavorable government policies. The loosening of party-union ties is thus likely to increase the potential for the emergence of ‘social movement unionism’ and alliances with new social movements on the basis of informal, issue-based and contingent alliances.

There are important insights in the work of Burgess and her model highlights clearly the importance of the strategic decisions of labor and party leaders in the context of social and political change. While this approach is applied to the particular cases of Mexico, Venezuela and Spain, Burgess is concerned to generalize this model to party-union relations in general (Burgess, 2004: 9-11). However, the ‘rational action’ approach of Burgess tends to ignore historical path dependencies and, in focusing on the rational orientations of labor movement leaders and activists, tends to downplay the importance of ideology in the framing and reorientation of union identities. In contrast to this rational action approach we present a historically grounded account of the crisis of party-union alliances in Western Europe which takes as its starting point the institutional context. Institutional continuity and change should be understood in terms of both the historical constraints imposed by ‘path dependency’ and the dynamic agency of ‘path shapers’ (Nielsen *et al* 1995). The ‘path dependency’ of party-union alliances in Latin America and Spain are different in fundamental ways from those prevalent in Western Europe and indeed, there are differing path dependencies within Western Europe (Crouch 1993). The specificity of divergent ‘path dependencies’ renders any general theory of party-union relations extremely problematic and it is similarly problematic to deduce any straightforward trajectory of trade union re-orientation following the crisis and de-composition of a party-union nexus. In Western Europe, unions developed a degree of autonomy from their political allies and the alliance was often formalized through a ‘historic’ compromise between the leaderships of organized labor and the social democratic state. National Variance within the liberal democratic states of Western Europe flowed from the perceived need for trade union leaderships to maintain the ‘balance’ between class solidarity and national (bourgeois) interests. This balance was contained in specific political settlements (Crouch, 1993; Hyman, 2001) whereby government concessions were granted to the union leaders in return for them exerting some discipline over rank-and-file wage

militancy (Flanders, 1974; Coates 1984, Hassel 2003). This required a specific set of party-union arrangements based on centralized and representative trade unions with well articulated mechanisms of control between leadership and membership base and powerful and favorably disposed social democratic political parties that were able and willing to deliver concessions. This process and its associated mechanisms provided the motivation for trade unions to engage in neo-corporatist exchange.

There were, therefore, important structural and institutional factors that shaped the strength and durability of a party-union nexus: namely, the density and centralization of a labor movement, the closeness of its relations with a social democratic party and the ‘governmental fitness’ of the social democratic party (Moschonas, 2002: 68). However, the social democratic compromise was always deeply contradictory. Social democratic parties of government presented themselves simultaneously as parties of the working class and parties of the people in general (Przeworski, 1985: 24-5). The logic of social democracy was to neutralize class conflict by a process of institutionalization and facilitation. This included the facilitation of collective bargaining and the provision of third party mediation services. The path-shaping decisions of labor leaders were thus constrained within the ideologies of *constraint* and the *national interest* and it thus constituted class struggle without revolutionary potential (Moschonas, 2002: 69). The development of party-union alliances in Western Europe was a product of how the strategic decisions of labor leaders were constrained and directed by the ideological inheritance of nationally specific forms of social democratic trade unionism. An understanding of this helps us understand why unions have sometimes preferred ‘exit’ when a more rational strategy would suggest ‘norm-breaking’ voice. Similarly, the maintenance of loyalty to party ties may have dominated when a logical or strategic approach would suggest ‘critical voice’ or ‘exit’. In the following section, we analyze examples of these seemingly paradoxical responses of trade unions to party-union ties in the context of Western Europe.

Neo-liberalism and the crisis of the party-union nexus in Western Europe

In this section, we explore the cases of Sweden, Germany, UK and France in order to highlight the importance of historical path dependency to the development and crisis of the DPUN. In each case we explore the national specificity of the party-union nexus and the ways in which the DPUN has been subject to decomposition. There are a number of

important changes that have undermined the social democratic form and content of the arrangements that underpinned party-union ties in Western Europe. In general, the de-industrialization of advanced European societies and the privatization and marketization of state-owned and administered industries and public services have been key points of pressure. Ruling economic and political elites have become increasingly unable or unwilling to offer concessions to organized labor. Social democratic political parties have submitted to this pressure and have been increasingly attracted to neoliberal policy prescriptions in the name of national business competitiveness. Where concessions to organized labor have remained, these have increasingly taken the form of defensive or ‘dented shield’ forms of social pacts associated with ‘competitive corporatism’ in which trade unions attempt to mitigate the worst effects of neoliberal restructuring (Rhodes, 1998). There have, however, been important differences with regard to the specific ways in which a neo-liberal agenda has been pursued by West European ‘parties of labor’ when in power and the dominant response of trade unions to neo-liberal reforms. In the UK, *New Labour* when in government between 1997 and 2010 attempted to introduce a new ‘shared value’ centered on ‘Third Way’ partnership and consensus. In Germany, France and Sweden, in contrast, the new capital accumulation strategy has involved a shift from consensus to confrontation. In Sweden, trade union opposition to neo-liberal restructuring has been somewhat muted and undeveloped and trade unions in the manufacturing and export sectors have developed an accommodation to neo-liberal restructuring (Bieler, 2006). In the UK, France and Germany there has been a complex pattern of accommodation and resistance. Attempts to mitigate the worst aspects of neo-liberalism through ‘risk-reducing’ partnership strategies sit alongside attempts to resurrect traditional forms of social democracy. More radical opposition has also occurred in the form of open hostility to neo-liberalism from dissident union and political groupings based on a rejection of the retreat of the state from its former role and functions. We argue that these divergent responses have been conditioned and constrained by the specificity of the DPUN. This has affected how the dynamics of neo-liberal restructuring have impacted on the strength and durability of the DPUN in particular nation states.

In Sweden, the DPUN was based on an *unparalleled intimacy* between the *Sveriges Socialdemokratiska Arbeteparti* (SAP) and the *Landsorganisationen i Sverige* (LO). This relationship was based on high levels of union density, an overlapping membership and a shared ideological vision between the LO and SAP. The unparalleled electoral success of the

SAP was instrumental to the development of the ‘Swedish Model’ based on centralized bi-partisan bargaining and the 1938 *Basic Agreement* which was an explicit ‘class compromise’ through which the LO secured high levels of social welfare in return for their involvement and support in the Rehn-Meidner model of growth that delivered high levels of productivity and profitability (see Fulcher, 1991; Kjellberg, 1992). The breakdown of this model and the neo-liberal reforms spearheaded by the SAP in the 1980s contributed to the formal divorce of the SAP and LO in 1987. The main dynamics in the breakdown of the DPUN were primarily *internal* to the specificities of the Swedish social democratic settlement. These emerged from the way in which the LO faced the social democratic state as ‘employer’; the increasing competition for union members between the LO and non-LO unions; and changes in the basis of party funding which reduced the reliance of the SAP on LO finance (Kjellberg, *op cit*: 102-3). These factors led both the LO and SAP to search for increasing institutional autonomy leading to the formal divorce in 1987 (Aylot, 2003). The ‘exit’ of the LO from the DPUN does not, however, mark the end of the party-union nexus and, despite the formal institutional divorce, the LO and the SAP remains ideologically and institutionally aligned through both formal and informal mechanisms (Aylott, *ibid*: 374-83). The constraints on party and labor leader disloyalty are clearly evident in the case of Sweden; although it is also clear that these constraints have declined in recent decades. Most importantly, LO unions continue to wield influence within the SAP through the enduring importance of ‘trade union committees’ (*faklig utskott*) that are able to submit motions to the General Assembly of the SAP and nominate candidates for internal elections. There is little evidence of the LO attempting to forge links with other political parties such as the Greens or the Left Party and LO representatives continue to influence SAP policy formation and candidate selection. There is also little evidence of Swedish unions adopting a ‘social movement’ identity and a marked continuation of the ‘political unionism’ that dominated Sweden throughout the 20th century.

In Germany, the DPUN was based on an *informal alignment* between the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD) and the unions and reflected a shared ideological commitment to the institutional practices of social partnership and co-determination (*Mitbestimmung*). The DPUN was established between the SPD and the unions which remained informal owing to the importance attached by the unions to maintaining good relations with parties other than the SPD. The informal relationship between leaders of

the SPD and the trade unions was also determined by the ways in which the system of co-determination de-politicized workplace trade unionism in Germany in favor of *betriebssegoismus* or workplace sectionalism (Müller-Jentsch, 1986). Consequently, leaders of both the SPD and the unions tended to articulate a discourse of social integration and consensus (Streeck, 1984). The constraints on party and labor leader disloyalty are less evident in Germany than in the Swedish case owing to the informal nature of the connections between the SPD and trade unions, the ongoing and enduring connections between trade unions and the center-right *Christlich Demokratische Union/Christlich Soziale Union* (CDU/CSU) and the enduring competition posed by the Greens on the left of German politics. However, there are important ideological constraints. The institutional embeddedness of social partnership has constrained the strategic choices available to union leaders in the context of neo-liberal restructuring. The mechanisms of co-determination have been utilized as a neo-liberal tool to control wage drift. There has been trade union opposition to neo-liberalism which began in the form of opposition to the *Hartz Reforms* introduced by the SPD/Green coalition government. This took the form of industrial unrest, links with civil society actors and the emergence of left wing alternatives to the SPD in the form of *Die Linke* (Nachtwey, 2009). However, the embeddedness of social partnership (Behrens et al., 2003: 39) and the enduring focus on sectoral bargaining have both constrained opposition to neo-liberalism and provided the basis for unions such as *IG Bergbau, Chemie, Energie* (IG BCE) to adopt a position in accommodation with neo-liberalism.

In Britain, the DPUN took the form of the *formal affiliation* of major trade unions with the *Labour Party*. The links between the *Labour Party* and the trade unions were formal, permanent and enduring, but consensus-based and neo-corporatist practices remained undeveloped in the UK context (Crouch, 1977). This was a consequence of the ways in which UK trade unions were wedded to the ideologies of ‘voluntarism’ and ‘economism’ and the ideological orientation of the British *Labour Party* towards ‘labourism’ and ‘Fabianism’ (Saville, 1973). Consequently, trade unions were less integrated into the institutions of the British state and the potential for party and labor leader disloyalty in the UK was, therefore, less constrained than in the case of Germany or Sweden. While affiliated trade unions have always had an important role in the formulation of *Labour Party* policy through the ‘block vote’ at Party conference, this has been significantly reduced in recent decades. In addition, the *Labour Party* always jealously guarded its autonomy from the ‘movement’ through the

ideology of ‘parliamentarism’. In the UK, therefore, there are important path dependencies determined by the institutional separation of economics and politics between the two wings of the British labor movement. The rejection of traditional social democracy by *New Labour* and the introduction of neo-liberal reforms by the post-1997 *New Labour* administrations resulted in a questioning of the party-union linkage within some unions and there are extreme examples of de-alignment in the case of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) and the rail and seafarers’ union RMT (McIlroy, 2009). There is also a minority tendency for UK trade unions to develop a ‘social identity’ through the ‘opening up’ of their representational and decision-making procedures and the forging of alliances with actors and movements in civil society (see, for example, Frege et al., 2004 for the case of the public sector union UNISON). In the main, however, UK unions remain seduced by the promise of political salvation through a radicalized or reclaimed *Labour Party* and informal processes of internal lobbying have developed alongside calls for realignment or exit particularly around the issue of public service reform.

The development of the labor movement in France was marked by the absence of a strong party-union nexus and by a tradition of trade union radicalism and syndicalist anti-statism. France represented a case of *fragmentation* where no linkage of the social democratic type was firmly established and where union density has been consistently low. In France, social democracy was an elitist project that lacked a social base in the working class (Bell and Criddle, 1988). The main union confederations in France are the Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail (CFDT), Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), and Force Ouvrière (FO) and these confederations were differentiated on the basis of ideological and/or confessional orientation. While forms of bi-partite and sometimes tri-partite neo-corporatism developed in France, these were mainly at the initiation of the state and the dominant tendency was for trade unions to be excluded from the institutional mechanisms of the French state. The potential constraints on party and labor leader disloyalty is thus least developed in the case of France owing to the elitist and *dirigiste* orientation of the French Socialist Party, the ideological fragmentation of the French trade union movement and the existence of party competition on the left of French politics (Padgett and Patterson, 1991: 6). The fractured nature of unions in France and their alignment with alternative parties of the Left has meant that the crisis of the French social model has been met with a highly complex response. The response has involved both an institutional reconfiguration of the relationship between

French unions and French political parties of the left and an ideological reconfiguration of French unions and union configurations. This reconfiguration has been precipitated by the modernization or ‘Europeanization’ of the French Socialist Party (PS) (Bell and Shaw, 1983) and the crisis and fragmentation of the French Communist Party (PCF) (Ross and Jenson, 1994). This fragmentation and disorientation of the political left has been mirrored in the complex and divergent responses of French unions to the challenges of neo-liberalism. The main focus of labor protest has been around opposition to pension and labor law reform and the CGDT, CGT and FO have each responded ambivalently to the protests (Andolfatto and Sabot, 2004). The main trends have been the ‘de-politicization’ of the CFDT, the increasing militancy of the FO and the ideological disorientation of the CGT. Following the collapse of the PCF, a space has opened up to the left of social democracy that has been partially filled by new unions such as *SUD* and others in the *G-10* that offer consistent opposition to the neo-liberal reforms. This development has not been matched on the political field where the space to the left of social democracy has remained highly competitive (Damesin and Denis 2005). However, the NPA (*Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste*) was formed in 2009 on the initiative of the *Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire* (LCR) in order to coalesce far left forces around an anti-capitalist and anti-neoliberal platform and the *Parti de Gauche* was founded in November 2008 by ‘left’ dissident members of PS.

As we have highlighted in this section, the loosening of party-union relationships has resulted in a diverse and complex range of responses by Western European trade unions. In the following section, we develop an ideal-typical schema to highlight the main trajectories taken by trade union reorientation in the context of the crisis and decline of DPUN relationships in Western Europe.

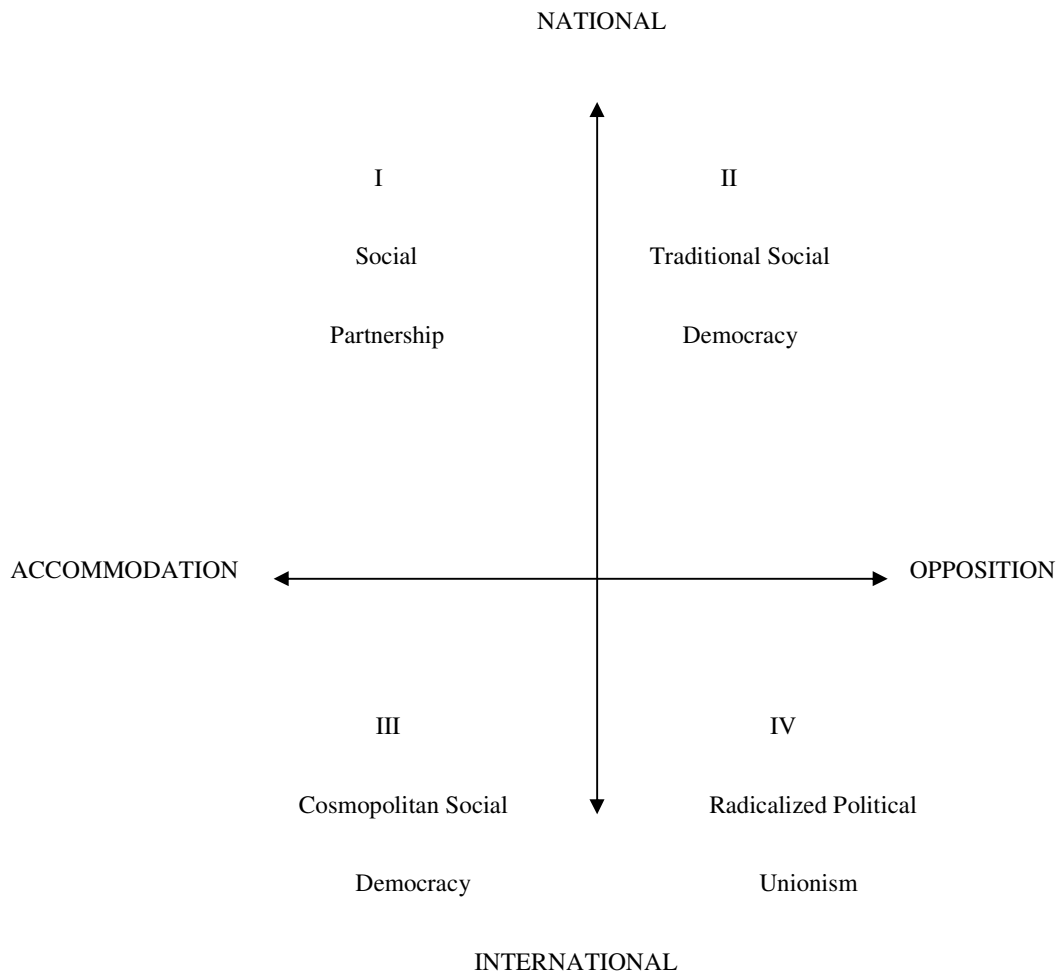
Party-union relations beyond the crisis: Alternative trajectories

The ‘path shaping’ decisions of trade union leaders are, therefore, constrained and conditioned by the historical path dependency of labor movement development in specific nation state formations. A range of alternative trade union identities reflect a diversity of ideological orientations and these orientations ‘frame’ the decisions made by labor leaders in decisions about existing and future links with political parties. The ‘path shapers’ within Western European trade unions are thus making decisions on issues of ‘exit’, ‘voice’ and ‘loyalty’ from varying historically determined levels of institutional embeddedness and

framed by nationally specific social democratic settlements. The case studies of Sweden, Germany, the UK and France provide an index through which it is possible to explore both the ideological identity of trade unions and the degree to which organized labor was integrated within the social democratic state. There are two important institutional dynamics underpinning the re-orientation of party-union relationships in Western Europe: the de-institutionalization of labor movements from the nation state and the ideological reframing of trade union identities and orientations. The de-institutionalization of labor movements is associated with neo-liberal restructuring and, in the context of the diversity of nationally specific trade union identities, has resulted in variegated responses to neo-liberal restructuring and a complex pattern of de-alignment and (partial) re-alignment between European trade unions and political parties.

The crisis of the party-union nexus opens up a range of strategic alternatives for unions which can be represented along two dimensions. On the first dimension trade unions can opt between an *accommodation* approach which involves exploring productivity coalitions with employers and social pacts with governments and an *opposition* approach which involves the development of combative and militant mechanisms of protest and dissent. The second dimension varies from the continuance of a *national* orientation to organization and mobilization to an *international* one. The national approach continues to rely on the maintenance or (re)creation of sympathetic government support for the aims and objectives of organized labor, while the international approach supplements national solutions by the addition of multinational or supra-national support structures. The adoption of a position on these dimensions is not simply the result of the rational choice calculations by labor movement actors, but it shaped and constrained by the path dependencies of union ideology and identity. In *figure 1* the Segments I, II and III represent reformulated or continuing scenarios for social democracy, while Segment IV represents a scenario based upon a rejection of the social democratic form and the development of an alternative ‘radical political’ identity. This highlights the ways in which social democratic trade unionism is fragmenting and the ways in which this fragmentation is constrained and directed by the path dependencies of party-union linkages. The decomposition of national social democratic settlements has, however, increased the complexity of the picture further through the ways in which it has generated a diverse response from different levels and segments of the labor movement within particular nation state societies.

Figure 1. Alternative Trade Union Trajectories



At the heart of social democracy is the belief that capitalism can be humanized in order to realize the socialist values of political democracy and economic equality. In programmatic terms, this has implied using the levers of the democratic nation state in order to intervene in the national economy. However, as an ideology which seeks to reform capitalism, social democracy is constantly subject to transformation by the dynamism of capitalism itself. Neo-liberalism poses a particular threat to the discourse and practice of social democracy as it undermines the democratic and regulatory practice of the nation state. We suggest that the (attempted) reformulation of social democracy under the impact of neo-liberalism presents

itself with four possible alternatives for unions. First, unions have the option to resist deinstitutionalization and re-frame their ideological orientation in order to embrace the associational politics of the ‘third way’ and the strategy of social partnership (Prabhaker, 2003; Upchurch, 2008). The *social partnership* orientation is based on an attempt to maintain the institutional relationship between trade unions and political parties based on the ideological reformulation of the relationship according to the discourse and practice of the Third Way. The ideology of the Third Way is premised on the need to reformulate social democratic political values in response to the pressures and dynamics of global competition (Giddens, 1998). In other words, trade unions can remain ‘loyal’ to their social democratic allies and renegotiate the DPUN through a re-casting of the institutional ties between party and unions and the subordination of trade union objectives to the neo-liberal policy prescriptions of their social democratic partners. The Third Way trajectory is based on the propensity of unions to adopt the policy of risk minimization and manifests itself in the attenuation of class conflict and its replacement by ‘progressive workplace consensus’. Risk is supposedly minimized by the building of a productivity coalition with employers in the interest of business competitiveness which provides the ideological impetus for ‘mutual gains’ in the workplace. There is evidence of such Third Way approaches within sections of the German trade unions (such as *IG BCE* – the mining, energy and chemical workers’ union) (Dribbusch and Schulten, 2008); in Britain, with the establishment of the TUC ‘Partnership Institute’ and New Labour government support for ‘Union Learning Representatives’ and workplace partnership initiatives (McIlroy 2008); and in France with the orientation of the CFDT since its ‘Liberalism or Statism’ Conference in 2000 (Bérout and Mouriaux 2001). In such cases, the emphasis has been on establishing national business competitiveness and reestablishing the legitimacy of trade unions through their support for such a project.

Second, unions have the option of resisting deinstitutionalization whilst maintaining a traditional social democratic orientation. The *traditional social democracy* orientation is based on an attempt to defend and revive the institutional *and* ideological foundations of national political settlements on the basis of a reconstituted and positive relationship between both social democratic and conservative parties and trade unions (Leggett, 2007). In other words, trade unions can exercise varying degrees of ‘norm based’ and ‘norm breaking’ ‘voice’ in order to lobby the ‘party of labor’ for a return to ‘traditional social democracy’. The ways in which ‘voice’ is exercised, however, is framed by the density of specific social

democratic settlements and the ideological inheritance of divergent trade union identities that condition and constrain the decisions of ‘path shaping’ trade union actors. In contrast to the Third Way, this orientation questions the inevitability of globalization and argues that it remains possible through the power of agency to reformulate the state-capital-labor relationship in the interest of labor (Garrett, 1998, 2003; Wickham-Jones, 2000). For trade unions, such a position implies a project to ‘reclaim’ social democracy and the maintenance of a struggle between ‘left’ and ‘right’ within the national party machinery (Taylor, 2003). In Sweden, for example, there are emerging divisions between unions organizing in the domestic and international sectors with regard to how to respond to the impact of globalization on the ‘Swedish Model’ between a ‘defend and restore’ camp and a ‘modernize and adapt’ camp (Bieler and Lindberg, 2008). A strategy of ‘internal lobbying’ is now seen as the way forward for many ‘left’ trade union leaders in the UK, who wish to ‘reclaim’ the Labour Party (Leopold 2006; McIlroy 2009). Such battles have also been reflected in the Keynesianism debate within the SPD in Germany and in France it is evidenced by the ‘militant’ turn of the FO and the ongoing realignment of the CGT.

Third, unions can attempt to broker new institutional relationships at the transnational level which involves the re-articulation of social democratic ideology in a *cosmopolitan* direction that goes beyond the economic and political nationalism of traditional social democracy. The *cosmopolitan social democracy* orientation reflects the institutional breakdown of the national social democratic settlement and an attempt to reconstitute the relationship between parties and unions at the transnational level on the basis of a shift from an ‘oppositional’ to an ‘integrative’ ideological orientation. In other words, unions can seek new institutional loyalties at the transnational level in order to exercise voice in emerging transnational forums whilst either maintaining or rejecting the DPUN at the national level. In Europe, this has included the attempt to rebuild institutional linkages between national and European trade unions and trade union confederations with transnational political groupings such as the *Party of European Socialists* (PES) in an attempt to institutionally embed organized labor within the decision-making processes of the European Union. Partnership between employers and employees is often central to the project and is even conceived as a form of ‘new governance’ typifying the ethos of the ‘European Social Model’ (Kristensen, 2001). At the European level, the ETUC have articulated this CSD ‘Third Way’ position through its uncritical support for social dialogue, European Works Councils and the European

Employment Strategy. The prospects for EU-wide Keynesianism ‘from above’, however, appear to be receding as EU policy has been steered with social democratic complicity towards a supra-national project of supply side reforms, ‘flexicurity’ and employability (Cammack 2004). This has also become evident in the UK with the emergence of an important anti-EU discourse amongst union leaders committed to the restoration of traditional social democracy.

Fourth, unions have the option of embracing the deinstitutionalization of the relationship between party and unions and re-framing their ideological orientation in line with a radical agenda that goes beyond traditional social democracy. The *radicalized political unionism* orientation represents both an institutional and ideological break from social democratic trade unionism and a rupture of the party-union nexus. Unions are thus able to exploit the ‘opening-up’ of civil society in order to liberate themselves from the institutional and ideological fetters of social democratic trade unionism and re-establish themselves as autonomous ‘movements’ in civil society. However, the resulting exit is both institutional and ideological and can result in new trade union identities that can be defined as ‘radical political’ rather than ‘social democratic’. This approach is both post-national and oppositional and has involved the re-framing of trade union identities and orientations around the global justice agenda (Tucker, 1991; Edwards, 2008). While there are examples of this orientation throughout Western Europe, it is important to note that it is the least developed of the four tendencies outlined in this article. Radical political unionism is a specific response by sections of the unions in Western Europe to the breakdown of ‘trust’ between actors in the old pluralist landscape. This orientation highlights the breakdown of institutionalized alliances and bureaucratic modes of organization and the mobilization of ‘networked’ trade unions (Passy, 2003: 41) in an increasingly transnational civil society (Moody, 1997). Unsurprisingly, this mode of trade union orientation is least developed in Sweden where ‘political unionism’ remains wedded to the defense of social democratic values (Vandenberg, 2006). In France, examples of this reorientation can be located in the militant orientation of the *SUD* and others in the G-10 over the pensions issue and public sector cuts (Damesin and Denis, 2005). In Germany, it is manifest in the willingness of left oriented sections of *IG Metall* and *Ver.di* to engage with *Die Linke* and mobilize against the Hartz reforms (Jüncke, 2007). In the UK, this orientation can be seen in the increased mobilizing capacity (and sometimes membership) of the ‘rejectionist’ FBU (Fitzgerald, 2005), the CWU in the Royal

Mail (Beale, 2003), the RMT (Darlington, 2007) and PCS (Upchurch et al., 2008) in their fight against public service cuts.

Conclusion: Beyond the chains that bind.....

The de-institutionalizing dynamics of neo-liberalism have clearly impacted on the established relationships between trade unions and social democratic political parties in Western Europe. The recomposition of social democracy around a Third Way agenda of supply side flexibility and marketization has shifted the terrain on which party-union alignments operate and transformed the meaning and logic underpinning a historically determined DPUN. The rules of the game have shifted from a positive and dynamic relationship between party and unions that harnessed the conflict between capital and labor within a national arena of compromise and trust to a negative relationship between parties and unions that seeks to negate the autonomous power and interests of labor and subordinate the narrow 'national interest' within a globalizing economy. This is why the rational action approach of Burgess is ultimately insufficient to the task of understanding the nature of party-union relationships in the contemporary world. The decisions surrounding 'exit', 'voice' and 'loyalty' are based not only on a rational assessment of costs and benefits, but an agenda which is attempting to ameliorate the worst consequences of neo-liberalism through the institutional and ideological frame inherited from national social democratic settlements. The unions and union confederations that truly 'exit' do so in both an institutional and ideological way. The latter involves the final and perhaps irreconcilable rupture of the social democratic compromise that has enabled unions to break free of the ideological fetters of 'constraint' and the 'national interest' and to become radical political unions in an increasingly global civil society.

Trade unions are and remain both 'economic' and 'political actors' and the 'politics of production' are inevitably underwritten by the 'politics of politics' (Burawoy, 1985: 254). Trade unions are, moreover, relatively powerless within the political sphere and have always been essentially defensive and reactive in terms of their political behavior (Taylor, 1989: xiv). These propositions remain valid, but it surely inadequate to measure and assess the 'political' behavior of trade unions in terms of 'nation state' dynamics that were developed and consolidated during the period of Keynesian welfare statism (cf. Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2010). As Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick (*ibid*: 317) argue, the relationship between the economic and political behavior of trade unions reflect the dynamics of ideology,

opportunity structure, organizational capacity and contextual challenges. However, the process of neo-liberal restructuring has transformed the terrain on which these dynamics operate and indeed transformed the discursive and material meaning and significance of these dynamics and processes. The ideological foundations of social democratic settlements have crumbled and recomposed in complex ways that escape the established discursive formulations around 'class' and 'nation'. The 'political' opportunity structures that trade unions face are similarly complex and include important examples of sub- and transnational realignment between parties and unions. The 'opening up' of civil society has the potential to blur the organization and institutional boundaries between the labor movement and other civil society actors in ways that complexify the 'organizational capacity' of trade unions. Ultimately, the process of neo-liberal restructuring has transformed the nation state. The nation state has not been weakened, but transformed by neo-liberal globalization and remains the central focus of political agency and struggle. However, as Sørensen (2004) has argued, the state has been transformed from an agency of economic management to a 'procedural-regulatory agency' which takes a polymorphous form with networks of other state and non-state actors. In the resulting reconfigurations of power and ideology, traditional conceptions of trade union 'politics', and in particular, the party-union nexus, are becoming increasingly anachronistic and marginal.

Abbreviations

CDU Christlich Demokratische Union – Germany.

CGT Confédération Générale du Travail –France

CFGT Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail – France

CSU Christlich Soziale Union - Germany

CWU Communication Workers Union -UK

DPUN Dominant party-union nexus

ETUC European Trades Union Confederation.

FBU Fire Brigades Union - UK.

FO Force Ouvrière (Workers' Force) – France.

KWS Keynesian Welfare State.

LO Landsorganisationen i Sverige – Sweden.

MNC Multinational Corporation.

NGO Non-governmental Organization.

NPA Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste -France

NUT National Union of Teachers – UK

PCF Parti communiste français – France.

PCS Public and Commercial Services Union - UK.

PES Party of European Socialists

PS Parti Socialiste – France.

RMT National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers – UK.

SAP Sveriges Socialdemokratiska Arbeteparti - Sweden.

SPD Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands - Germany.

SUD Solidaires, Unitaires, Démocratiques – France.

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